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ABSTRACT

This discussion of current proposals for the deregulation of broadcasting in the United Kingdom argues that several questions should be considered: (1) whether the existing system of obligations ought to be retained; (2) how any system of obligations can best be enforced and policed if this proves necessary; and (3) whether defenders of the principles of public service broadcasting (PSB) can provide adequate answers to complaints that have been made about the practices which are supposed to implement these principles, or whether alternative principles should be considered that would provide a novel and more adequate editorial policy for broadcasting. An assessment of the impact on broadcasting of the principles and regulations that have been adopted and routinely implemented is followed by discussions of the principles of PSB; the practice of PSB; the special relationship that exists between broadcasting and the public sphere; the concept of "national identity"; and existing relationships between popular culture and the commercial sector. It is concluded that, although the unqualified implementation of several of the principles of PSB inhibits further development of popular broadcasting, there is no need to abandon all of the PSB principles, and that new editorial criteria and practices are needed, as well as new economic strategies, if current limitations on the development of broadcasting are to be overcome. (33 references) (CGD)

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In Defence of the Tyranny of Popular Taste: a case for popular broadcasting

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A case for popular broadcasting

Introduction

To regulate or not to regulate, that is the question. Well, at least, that is the question which much of the recent writing on the future of broadcasting would have us believe is the most pressing at the present time. I want to suggest, however, that is not. I want to suggest this, because contrary to what has been supposed, there is no unambiguous, nor concerted effort being mounted within the commercial sectors of the communication industries to thoroughly deregulate broadcasting in the UK. This is not deny that there are certain commercial groups lobbying for deregulation to remove certain obligations on them to maintain a quality of output and balance of programmes. This lobbying is, however, unlikely to be successful, not because it is being opposed by defenders of the principles of public service broadcasting, but because it does not make commercial nor political sense to the key forces directly involved. To put it rather baldly, for the moment, their commercial and political interests would not be served by undermining established standards of output nor by completely disregarding the present mix of programmes.

The proposals which stand some chance of being implemented do not, in fact, recommend a free-for-all. Such proposals do not envisage a system of electronic communication being put together that will be utterly indifferent to any and all obligations or regulations. Neither do they envisage disbanding existing regulatory bodies, nor a refusal to create new ones. The questions which should be commanding our attention, therefore, are those which ask us to identify which obligations or regulations will in future be deemed acceptable, and which should be. And, we should be asking whether or not the existing system of obligations - a system only partly composed of the principles of public service broadcasting - ought to be retained, let alone expanded as some have been recommending. In addition, we should be asking how best any system of obligations can be enforced and policed if this proves necessary.

It has been claimed that 'it has served us well' this system of obligations based upon the principles of public service broadcasting. Of this claim it should be asked not just has it, but also, in light of the considerable dissastisfactions with and criticisms of the practice of public service broadcasting, who, precisely, has been served well by it. There are, after all, many groups who do not think that they have been well served by public service broadcasting, who think, rather, that they have been done continuous disservice by it. How do the defenders of the *principles* of

public service broadcasting deal with the complaints which have been made of practices which are supposed to implement these principles? If they can provide no adequate answers, perhaps instead of defending long-standing principles with one or two ammendments, we might be better employed at the present moment considering alternative principles, considering, in fact, a novel and more adequate editorial policy for broadcasting. These, then, are the main questions to be considered in what follows. This interrogation should start by assessing the impact on broadcasting of the principles and regulations which have been adopted, and routinely implemented.

The crisis of public service broadcasting.

In most European countries, as in the UK, programmes and services are still provided by public sector and by private sector organisations that compete 'freely' with one another for the majority share of potential viewers. Their freedom to compete with one another, in most, though by no means all European countries, has been externally regulated by the State. That competition must remain within the framework of relevant laws, and within codes of conduct monitored and approved by the State. In the UK, at least, broadcasting organisations have till now willingly complied with most of that which has been required of them by the State. In most of them also, again as in the UK, the public sector has traditionally been seen as the instrument for the maintenance of the 'national' culture, as the instrument which enables one section of the nation to address all the others in the processing of 'serious' matters, as the instrument which has enabled the public expression of a sense of identity with 'the nation as a whole', and as the instrument which is inspired by and gives voice to that structure of values, thoughts and sentiments which is taken to underpin the life of the nation, to give it meaning and a sense of direction and coherence.

But, in recent years, the future of public sector provision has come to look bleak. Throughout Europe, since the beginning of the decade, public sector broadcasting has been showing signs of crisis. It has been unsettled and weakened by political, technological and economic factors. Among the most important of these are:

1. The escalating costs of production, coupled with cuts in public expenditure have eroded the financial base of public sector broadcasting.

2. In most European countries, the market for television sets is virtually saturated, which is to say virtually every household in most of them now possesses at least

one TV set. Partly because of this entrepreneurs have begun to shift their attention to stimulating interest in the acquisition of 'add-on' technology - VCRs, and to a lesser extent, home computers and compatible hi-fi systems. This saturation means that licence fee income can now only increase by raising the fee. At present levels, the fees are no longer sufficient to absorb increases in production costs, *and* the demands on finances made by investment in newer technologies such as Direct Broadcasting by Satellite.

3. There have been a number of vigorous and sometimes aggressive initiatives within the private sector, both in relation to traditional broadcasting and the development of newer delivery systems, which signals an "expansion of price and profit, of commodity exchange, as the dominating mode of organisation in yet another area of cultural production"[13].

4. Various market research bodies have been suggesting the potential audience for television has been fragmenting. They are beginning to recommend that network schedulers now have to abandon notions that there is always a potential 'mass' audience, and instead, to think more about planning and targetting for 'minority' audiences. These suggestions cut the ground away from the traditional 'public service' conceptions of public sector organisations. They can no longer presume to address the 'public' - 'the nation as a whole', since it is becoming clearer to market researchers, at least, that there is, more often than not, no such whole to address. This research in [illegible] support to thesis that the consensus which is often presumed by spokesmen for and practitioners of public service broadcasting has withered or, at least, is no longer hegemonic (if, indeed, it ever was).

In the UK there are moves afoot which have been seen to intensify the threats to public sector broadcasting. Over the last year or so, Professor Peacock's committee has been considering how, in future, broadcasting in the UK is to be funded. Prominent among the proposals they have had to consider, are those which recommend that in future the BBC should raise revenue either via advertising or one or other of the possible forms of sponsorship. At the same time, there have been a number of indications that the present Government has adopted a de-regulatory stance towards broadcasting and the business of communication generally. It has demonstrated in relation to the establishment of cable services in the UK that it is not willing to become financially involved and, in addition, has sanctioned a partial retreat by the State from formulating principles and codes of conduct for those services. But, their posture in

relation to traditional broadcasting remains, at the present time, unclear and a little ambiguous.

There are grounds for thinking that there are forces within the present Government who will advocate similar de-regulatory moves, who will argue that broadcasting should not be made exempt from the free play of market forces. At the same time, there are those in the Conservative party, including the Prime Minister herself, who feel that in moral and broadly ideological matters there are perhaps good reasons for considering the moderation of market rules. After all, might not the State's indifference encourage the sort of commercial exploitation of sex and violence which recently led Winston Churchill to seek new legislative controls to bring broadcasting into line with other media. Clearly, the advocates of this case think that 'broadcasting is too important' simply to be left to the broadcasters, and that their 'good faith' and 'good judgement' cannot always be relied upon. Furthermore, we should not forget the continuing, sporadic outbreaks of political concern about broadcasting. Governments of the day, of whatever political complexion, have never been entirely happy to leave the representation of political affairs completely up to the broadcasters. In times such as these when it is only with considerable difficulty that consensual ground can be identified, it is highly unlikely that uneasy parliamentary forces would be satisfied to leave the conduct of journalistic coverage of political issues in the hands of de-regulated broadcasting organisations.

At the present time, then, the picture remains somewhat fuzzy. Yet, there are those who are now convinced that the present Government is prepared to countenance a further measure of deregulation, that it is prepared to accept that the State should retreat from the business of broadcasting and leave the conduct of that business much more in the hands of those directly involved. Should the Government decide to free broadcasters from intervention by the State, over and above that measure of intervention that might be required were broadcasting organisations to infringe the law, such action, it is feared, will further erode the conditions which enable the fulfillment of the principles of public service broadcasting (PSB). So, it is not only the future of public sector organisations which are seen to be at risk, but also, in the future, the influence of these PSB principles.

The defence of the principles of PSB.

The fact that broadcasting is in something of a crisis, the fact that many entrepreneurs and market researchers have publicly stated that old certainties about consumer demand

and how best to respond to it can no longer be taken for granted, has not stimulated much in the way of critical, academic re-appraisal. Instead, the predominant response has been to issue calls to the faithful to spring to the defence of, for the most part, those principles of broadcasting which have long been considered by official bodies and parliaments as essential. According to a recent publication from the Broadcasting Research Unit, the main or essential elements of public service broadcasting "should be retained within whatever systems are devised to provide broadcasting as new communications technologies come into use" because "they serve...important democratic aims", and "are a unique device serving our highest interests and are by now an integral part of the social fabric". If the essential principles are lost, it is suggested, "we shall be diminished as a nation".[2] James Curran and Jean Seaton have proposed that public service broadcasting should be strengthened because "it provides the best available protection against the pressure of market forces, and the best guarantee of a genuinely 'mixed' programming policy".[3] In line with both publications cited, Nicholas Garnham has proposed that the principles of PSB should not only be defended, but also that the sphere of their influence should be expanded to include the operations of the newer systems of delivery.[4] Let us examine the case they have been making a little further.

Each of these contributors has been concerned to separate the *principles* from the *practice* of PSB. The Broadcasting Research Unit's document states, almost at the outset, that it is not "a defence of the existing public-service (broadcasting) institutions as they are today or as they may become", though its reservations are qualified by the suggestion that "though the structure we have is not perfect nor perfectly operated, in general it has served us extremely well"[5]. Why they are so keen to do so, is a direct result of their recognition of the dissatisfaction with, and criticism of programmes which seem to give expression to the principles they would have us defend. Each makes it seem that this, apparently necessary, separation of principle and practice is a relatively easy, straightforward business. But, in their rush to make this separation, these authors make it seem that when the practices of the broadcasting organisations have attracted critical fire there were major lapses in the implementation of the established principles. The effect of this construction is to present the established principles as broadly acceptable, and the only major problem as in the implementation of them. That the principles of PSB seem not always to have been implemented as fully as they should have been has to do with a number of factors, but foremost among them are said to be the pressures arising from the commercial colonisation of this sector of cultural production. The defenders of PSB see little, if anything, positive in this colonisation. Although

we can agree with them that it has weakened the influence of the principles of PSB, we need not, and should not agree with them that this has always had detrimental effects upon broadcasting nor upon the wider cultural formations into which the ouput has been selectively integrated.

For the most part those recommending the defence, strengthening, and/or expansion of the principles of PSB have adopted the view that market forces or mechanisms have not served 'us' well, indeed, in the more extreme cases, have not served 'us' at all. Each sees the principles of PSB as the means by which to contain or counteract the effects of commercialisation in this sector of cultural production and consumption. Yet, they go on to remind us that in the UK we have never experienced the effects of unbridled market mechanisms, and that this has been so because the influence of the principles of public service was extended to the commercial sector from its outset in 1955. Had that influence not been extended, then, so the argument goes, 'quality' would not have been preserved and there "might have been an easy surrender to the tyranny of popular taste as defined by straightforward box office calculation".[63] But, if we have not had the experience of raw commercial broadcasting in the UK, it must follow that neither have we had the experience of broadcasting fully under the influence of the preferred PSB principles. Rather, it might be better to say that the broadcasting services we have had experience of in the UK have been influenced by two sets of principles, public service ones *and* commercial ones. Moreover, it has been argued, not least by those who would have us defend the PSB principles that commercial principles have for some time now been the dominant ones. So, if the existing broadcasting organisations are thought to have 'served us well', why are we not being asked to defend those dominant principles, or, if this is too unpalatable, then that combination of principles in which the commercial ones have been dominant? If, and this seems to be accepted, both sets of principles have been operative, and if the commercial ones have been dominant in the combination, it does seem a little odd that so much good is attributed to the public service principles and so much that is deemed to be bad is attributed to commercial ones.

But, before taking this conundrum further, what are these principles which, while they may not have been implemented as well as they could have been, are said to have served us well and to have saved us from 'the tyranny of popular taste'?

1. It has always been emphasised as essential that broadcasting services should be made available to everyone in the UK. Broadcasting services should take as their universe 'the nation as a whole', and not merely those sectors of that universe who can afford to pay for

them. If, it is argued, broadcasting had been or is to become subject only to commercial criteria, then only the most profitable sectors would be served.

2. Broadcasting services should be operated in 'the national interest'. They have to recognise that there are "issues and challenges which go beyond the local and particular and effect us all"[53], that there are occasions when they should address their users as members of the nation.

3. PSB should provide programmes of high quality, and should not yield to pressures which would result in low standards and uniformity. The pressures customarily cited here are commercial ones. It has long been argued, well before the age of broadcasting, that to mix commerce and culture is to court disaster by giving unwarranted, or perhaps, even exclusive attention to the mores and customs of 'low' life. This principle has of late been called in for some fairly major repair work which shall be considered shortly.

4. PSB should be accountable to the public, principally via its relationship to Parliament.

5. PSB should be 'independent'. It should be independent in the sense that it sets itself apart from all vested, sectional interests, including those that might be attributed to the government of the day.

To this list of the longer standing principles, others have been added. The Broadcasting Research Unit's document includes the following: minorities, especially disadvantaged minorities, should receive particular provision; one main instrument of broadcasting should be directly funded by the corpus of users; broadcasting should be structured so as to encourage competition in good programming rather than competition for numbers; and, the public guidelines for broadcasting should be designed to liberate rather than restrict the programme makers. So, for the most part they are the principles which have long been endorsed by official review bodies, by Parliament and by the editorial executives of the broadcasting organisations.

The practice of PSB.

The proposed defence of public service broadcasting comes down in the end to a defence of principles in the abstract. These principles have been mythologised in the sense meant by Barthes; they have been worked into the fabric of a myth of broadcasting in the UK from which the contingent and the historical have been banished. One consequence of this been

to fasten on and, at best, tinker with the existing arrangements for the public supervision of broadcasting. It is difficult to see how the defenders of PSB could recommend much else given that the myth in which they have entrapped themselves - a myth which like any other - makes already existing social arrangements seem permanent and inescapably fixed. We cannot, if we are to decide whether or not these principles are worth defending, be so casual in dismissing broadcasting activities. These are activities which official sources at any rate have seen as expressing or manifesting these principles. At the same time, these are broadcasting activities which have been accused of under-representing some groups, of totally misrepresenting, or even ignoring others. So, assuming that these accusations carry some weight with the defenders of PSB principles, why should they continue recommending support of them?

Let us return to the historical and the practical matters of broadcasting to explore what the effects of defending and extending the principles of PSB might be. Have we, or have we not, seen what follows from regulating broadcasting in line with the principles it is now proposed that we defend? Can we say that commercial objectives and principles have 'corrupted' the pursuit of practically implementing PSB principles? What evidence is there for the suggestion that they have served 'us' (who, or which social groups, exactly) well? And, if that evidence is not be found, are we still prepared to say that such regulation has served us well? In turning to answer these questions, we should note at once that, especially in the case of news and current affairs TV, and contrary to what the defenders might want to claim, there is little evidence to suggest any systemic or systematic disregard for the principles of PSB. The evidence would be better read as suggesting that as a matter of routine most of the principles have been practically implemented.

To back up this reading of the evidence, let's start with the suggestion made by Jean Seaton that so far as official thinking is concerned, these principles have been abandoned. Until the 1970s, she suggests, "an assumption of commitment to an undivided public good lay beneath all official thinking on radio and television". But, in 1977, "the Annan Report abandoned this assumption, and replaced it with a new principle of liberal pluralism. The ideal ceased to be the broad consensus - the middle ground upon which all men of good sense could agree. Rather it became, for Annan and those who supported or inspired him, a free market place in which balance could be achieved through the competition of a multiplicity of independent voices". The result, she concludes, "has been confusion and crisis - from which no new received doctrine has yet emerged".[23]

We can agree that no, entirely new official doctrine has yet emerged and received wholehearted official backing, but Seaton's case is somewhat exaggerated, and it is contradicted by what she and her co-author James Curran then went on to say about some of the contradictions in public policy on the media. There they pointed out that the notion of a 'public good' "implies a commonly accepted consensus of opinion within society. It has become increasingly difficult to arrive at any such broadly based agreement", an observation with which many of those associated with Annan's review concurred at the time. They went on to point out that it has, however, not been abandoned as an ideal, and that many of the revisions and recommendations put forward by Annan's committee were formulated "with the intention of encouraging a more sensitive balance. Annan remained committed to the notions of 'common interest', 'impartiality' and 'balance' on which public service is based".[89]

This can be best illustrated with reference to the discussion of how these core concepts applied to news programming. This sector of programming had, well before and during the course of Annan's review, attracted considerable critical fire on many fronts. Given the intensity and the concerted character of that fire from a variety of sources, it would have been difficult for Annan's committee to have been anything other than reformatory in their remarks. But it did not at all depart from the view that a news service fired by the ideals of public service should demonstrate due impartiality. Where this committee did depart from established traditions, was in its recommendations as to how this might be achieved ~~in circumstances which~~ were perceived to have changed considerably.

Annan's committee considered the demonstration of due impartiality to be composed of three elements. The first "should allow the widest possible range of views and opinions to be expressed. Broadcasters are not doing their job if they allow only one view to monopolise their services. Nor have they fulfilled their responsibilities if this view is countered by one opposite view, when in fact people want to discuss the issue in different terms from those in which it was originally posed".[90] That this was emphasised reflects the committee's recognition of dissension not only in the lower ranks of broadcasters but also in the world beyond the broadcasting organisations. According to the Report, during the 1960s and early 1970s a new vision of life in the UK had been taking shape, one which "reflected divisions within society, divisions between classes, the generations and the sexes, between north and south, between the provinces and London". A news service which did not acknowledge these divisions and moreover, the growth of hostility "to authority as such; not merely authority as expressed in the traditional organs of State

but towards those in any institution who were charged with its governance",[10] could not long hope to avoid what Anthony Smith called a 'crisis of credibility'.

The second element indicated that there were limits to the pluralism to which Annan's committee was inclined, if it was inclined to pluralism at all. Fired by the ideals of public service, broadcasters "must take account, not just of the whole range of views on an issue, but also of the weight of opinion which holds these views. Their duty to let the public hear various voices does not oblige them to give too much weight or coverage to opinions which are not widely held. While it is right that the established view should be challenged, equally it is essential that the established view should be fully and clearly put and that the status and implications of the challenge should be made clear".[11] In these and other remarks, there is no hint of recommending the indifference that is associated with pluralism. The established view should rightly, in the committee's estimation, have privileges that other views of less weight - views without the establishment's seal of approval, whatever the extent of their popular support - should not have. It was stressed that while due impartiality "should not be synonymous with mathematical balance, nor should it be confused with neutrality or indifference. The broadcasters are operating within a system of parliamentary democracy and must share its assumptions. They should not be expected to give equal weight or show an impartiality which cannot be due to those who seek to destroy it by violent, unparliamentary or illegal means".[12]

The third element again implied a measure of openness. In their exercise of due impartiality, "broadcasters have to recognise that the range of views and the weight of opinion are constantly changing. What may be an acceptable and justifiable approach to an issue at any one time will not necessarily remain so for all time". Again this reflects what has been seen as the crisis of hegemony, the crisis of social authority which formed the context for the Annan committee's deliberations. Clearly it was felt that some concessions had to be made, that news broadcasters had to demonstrate that they were responsive to the cleavages out of which the crisis had emerged. But, at the same time, there were no moves in the direction of abandoning the hard core principles of public service. Broadcasters were positively encouraged to continue to "treat controversial subjects with due impartialty".[13]

The charges that TV news and current affairs programmes are biased are by now quite familiar. Through the work of the Glasgow University Media Group, it has come to be accepted that so far as TV news is concerned, whether transmitted by the BBC or by ITN, there is a deep-rooted bias against trade unionism and against the forms of action which are

ccustomarily employed in the pursuit of particular objectives. As Harrison's study[14] of the GUMG's earlier work makes clear, the evidence produced is wanting in several respects. Yet, even in Harrison's study, there is a willingness to accept that particular trade union disputes were not treated as they should have been. He too, like the GUMG, on noting these instances, seems to attribute the shortcomings to failures in the implementation of the principles of PSB. They are, he would suggest, instances when the principles of impartiality and balance have slipped. This is, as I pointed out, in a review of *More Bad News* something of misrepresentation. If the organisation and conduct of news stories is of a kind which diminishes or traduces the perspectives adopted by particular trade unions or trade unionists, this occurs not because of a failure to observe the basic editorial principles, but because they have been observed. Remember, all broadcasters are required to observe is *due* impartiality, and the formulae which have been evolved to do so permit them to *rank* perspectives, or, particular attitudes and opinions, just so long as the rankings made give privileged visibility to those which emerge from the institutionalised sectors of power. This does not prohibit the questioning of the views or the actions proposed by governments of the day, but it does prohibit the substitution of 'established views' by views deemed to have less 'weight', even when in numerical terms the latter might well have considerably more popular support.

If we are to defend and indeed expand the sphere of influence of the principles of PSB, we should then be clear that we are advocating the retention ~~of a service of news~~ and current affairs which will continue to strive to keep itself in line with at least those political perspectives which are taken to be established and, in a formal sense, representative. It will be a service of news which will question such perspectives independently - that is, from a position which does not take sides, but which accepts as legitimate or really consequential only those sides which are currently acknowledged by those 'in power'. It will not, however, transgress the boundaries of the 'public sphere', because such a news service will still accept that it is only within this sphere that rational political beings exist, and beyond its boundaries exist only 'ordinary people/viewers', or worse, 'extremists' and 'fanatics', or those whose powers of reasoning are in some other respect suspect or wanting.

If we are to defend these PSB principles then we should also be clear that we will continue with a service of news whose capacity to inform and educate is suspect. Harrison is right in his extended critical review of the GUMG's studies to suggest that its powers to render themes drawn from dominant ideologies authoritative were in those studies greatly

exaggerated. Harrison argued that "television's role of 'selling' the existing order and 'legitimating the consensus'", (if, we assume that there is an already fashioned consensus for it to legitimate), "only works if the ideological messages it transmits are widely internalised by the audience".[16] Yet, there is an abundance of evidence to suggest that whatever TV news transmits, its internalisation is uneven and patchy. Various studies in the last few years (not to mention earlier ones) have shown that not much is learned and retained from news by those from social strata which are classically thought of as subordinate. A recent study by Gunter noted that "studies of learning from television news...have indicated that this medium may be relatively ineffective at enhancing public awareness and understanding of current news events". Moreover, "contrary to what one might expect from the ratings of news programmes and from claims that viewers make about them as important sources of information, reserach on televsion bulletins has indicated frequent miscomprehension and extensive forgetting of stories".[17] Gunter's own study confirms the findings of these others. An average overall "news-awareness score of 22.93 points out of a possible 46, or a 49.8% correct response rate" was achieved. Gunter observed that "the general pattern to emerge was that awareness of the previous week's news was greatest among those respondents who claimed to consume more news from the main news media, who claimed to talk about the news, and who said they read broadsheet rather than tabloid newspapers".[17] The "total news awreness" scores for tabloid readers was 17.87, while for broadsheet readers it was 23.98. He also observed that while "relatively well known domestic and foreign figures were correctly identified, awareness of whyexactly they had been in the news was usually far less extensive".[18]

If, on the basis of such evidence, the presumed informativeness of TV news has to be qualified, so too must its presumed 'trustworthiness'. Recent surveys conducted by SCPR asked respondents who claimed to read a daily newspaper regularly (at least three times per week) to suppose that they saw or heard conflicting or different reports of the same news story on radio, television and in their newspaper, and then to state which of the three they would be most likely to believe. 57% sai they be most likely toelieve the one on TV; 15% nominated the one on radio; and 16% the one in their newspaper. One in ten said they did not know which one they would believe. Of those who said they were regular readers of one or other of the broadsheets, only 39% proposed TV news, while 59% of the regular readers of *The Express* or *The Mail* did so, and 66% of regular readers of *The Mirror*, *The Sun* or *The Star* did likewise. The authors concluded that this "analysis by which newspapers they read served only to reinforce the poor showing of the middlebrow

and popular papers".[19] But, how well do these findings reflect upon the performance of TV news?

A study conducted by Martin Collins concerned itself with people's perceptions of bias in TV news. Among a number of other things the respondents in this study were asked to indicate the source of information they considered "most accurate", and that which they considered "most detailed". As to that which they considered most accurate, 41% proposed TV news, 17% the press, 7% radio, and 36% said they id not know, or could not nominate any of these. As to their perceptions of which was the most accurate, again 41% nominated TV news, 25% the press, 6% radio, and 28% found they could not nominate any of these or did not know which to nominate. What is noteworthy about thse findings are the high proportions of those classified as 'don't knows', suggesting a perhaps unexpectedly high level of agnosticism. Collins also observed that "as many as 46% considered news and current affairs programmes were sometimes deliberately misleading", while only 38% thought they were "generally honest", and commented upon these findings that they could be seen as "a simple expression of scepticism".[20]

It would seem reasonable to conclude that the levels of scepticism recorded by this study are higher than might have been expected, and that the level of scepticism is related to what would seem to be a considerable degree of incomprehension and misunderstanding of TV news stories. If, as appears to be the case, there is a good deal of the output of TV news which is neither understood nor retained, this might well encourage feelings of mistrust. That said, it is probably more accurate to the fact that brought to the act of viewing are competences and expectations of a quite different kind from those which have been brought to the activity of producing news stories. In other words, as work by Morley[21] and by Wren-Lewis[22] has demonstrated, such incomprehension can be related to the coming together of different schemes of interpretation and understanding.

The point which has to be stressed in this context is that we have seen little evidence that TV news journalists are prepared to make the kinds of shifts required to engage with those world-views which fall outside that range which are routinely drawn upon to provide the raw material of their story-telling. Nor has there been much evidence to suggest that they are inclined to reform their story-telling procedures to bring them more into line with those which are integral to the everyday lives of many sections of the universe of potential viewers. Why not? I would suggest the answer lies in fully appreciating the strength of the bonding agents which connect serious TV programmes to the structures of thought and the processes of thinking which are peculiar to the arenas of public opinion and debate. These bonding agents are none other than the editorial

criteria and constraints, certain of the principles of PSB, due impartiality and balance, which, when practically observed, privilege the public sphere, privilege the sphere of informed/expert opinion and of parliamentary politics. Their routine, practical implementation, (however difficult and demanding this is in a situation in which 'consensus' may still be dreamed of, but cannot any longer be said to be an already accomplished fact), also continue to privilege those forms of processing knowledge which may well be peculiar to the public sphere and which are still claimed to be 'rational'.

If we could be sure of at least two things, this symbiotic relationship between TV journalism and the public sphere may not be a problem. If we could be sure that the official perspectives which claim to be 'rational' really are so, and, if we could be sure that the perspectives which are to be found beyond this sphere really are 'irrational', then we could be reasonably confident in advocating that the present set-up be defended and, indeed extended. However, there is abundant evidence from the studies of critical researchers to support the view that official perspectives are often inadequate and misleading, often partial rather than comprehensive and, often motivated by questionable interests. Moreover, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that the everyday bodies of knowledge, the bodies of 'common sense' which exist beyond the public sphere, and which are the targets of those who inhabit that sphere, are not as 'irrational' as they have often been made to seem.

The Public *versus* The Private.

Within the context of the current speculation and debate about the future of broadcasting it has been argued that it is important to defend this special relationship between broadcasting and the public sphere, on the grounds that the latter is, ideally speaking, an arena of social interaction within which public opinion is formed and mobilised by a reasoning public, goverened by the rules of rational discourse. There it would seem, people are addressed as rational political beings, rather than as consumers. There, they are defined as citizens exercising public rights of debate within a communally argued structure of rules. This sphere has been contrasted with, and opposed to another - the economic or the private sphere wherein producers and consumers exercise private rights, consumerism is pervasive and people flounder and collide with one another in a state of disunity and dysfunctional ignorance.[23] It is this other sphere which seems to be ascendant. Its rise is seen to be based upon several factors, not least, the commercialising of broadcasting.

Neither the BBC nor the commercial broadcasting companies are exclusively oriented to the public sphere. There are many programmes transmitted by both which are oriented to the private sphere as well. The programmes which are rooted in the former - news and current affairs programmes in the main - though they may not attract and hold the attention of audiences as large as those, mainly entertainment, programmes rooted in the private sphere still remain dominant. That dominance has, however, become fragile. Over the last few years we have seen current affairs programmes increasingly being pushed to the margins of the schedules. The marginalisation of such programmes has been seen as one manifestation of creeping commercialism and as heralding the beginnings of a decisive lurch in the direction of the 'tyranny of popular taste'.

The erosion of the institutional dominance of 'serious' current affairs TV has been taken as one sign, among a number of others, that the possibility for mounting rational, in depth, explorations of major issues of a kind that seem to affect us all is made more difficult so far as broadcasting is concerned. There have been other signs. For a number of years now, writers have drawn attention to the fact that attempts have been mounted to make TV news and current affairs 'entertaining'. We have seen research conducted which has pointed to, and has been critical of, the tendencies of new reports to 'dramatise' the narration. In *Understanding News*, John Hartley has informed us that the "narrative structure of the news...bears a very close resemblance to the structure of certin key types of television fiction, especially the police series", and that "stories are told in entertaining language, and [illegible] where possible to brighten things up".[24] In Televising Terrorism, we are told that there are "some interesting similarities in the way particular forms of journalism and fiction handle the issues. The standard devices of the action-adventure series, for example, combine to produce the same stress on dramatic events...as in news coverage".[25] In their analysis of *Nationwide*, Brunsden and Morley told us that "the space from 6pm to 7pm does tend also to be populated by domestic serials, comedies, panel games, and *Nationwide* is 'contaminated' by, or actively parasitic upon, these alternative genres, as well as aspects of the zone preceding the early evening news, that reserved for children's programmes".[26]

The late Phillip Elliott once remarked that "much of what we now take as information and as an informative process of communication based on a rational model are anything but, having a high level of symbolic, mythical content and passive entertainment value", and he set out to warn his readers that the commercial exploitation of the newer technologies would continue "the shift away from involving people in society as political citizens of nation states

towards involving them as consumption units in a corporate world".[27] Clearly much of the news and current affairs output is inconsistent with these writers' expectations of an 'informative process based on a rational model'. That output strikes them as transgressing cultural boundaries. The factual, and the serious is not only mixed up with the fictional and seemingly frivolous, it is also contaminated and devalued in the process. For them, 'fictional' and 'entertainment' forms have no place in what should be a rational process of informing, since the latter embody a type of mental experience which is considered to be inferior in a whole series of ways.[28]

There are a number of problems with this dichotomy. First of all, it is a dichotomy which, in historical terms, has become increasingly difficult to sustain. That which was clasically seen as the private sphere has, since the 19th century been increasingly 'publicised' through various kinds of political activity, including the political activity of the State. The activities of the latter have certainly been enhanced of late by the exploitation of information technologies. Marjorie Ferguson is just one among many to suggest that the take up and use of these technologies by the state and corporate interests may endow them with immense capacities for control. She has suggested that the capacity to obtain "the detailed profile of an individual's or family's public and private transactions made visible by cross-tabulation of data about spending patterns, travel arrangements, information requests and entertainment choices, as well as marital, medical, educational or criminal records, means that we can no longer cling to a culture-bound concept of 'private' life hidden from the world".[29]

This is not speculation about some future state of affairs. Such cross-tabulation, and the intelligence it affords about 'private' life, is already possible. So, Ferguson proposes, "that boundaries are blurring between the public and private spheres of economic and social life within the family and between the family and the state...Our peculiarly British concept of privacy, as one traditionally associated with the domestic and personal life-style of the individual...is directly challenged by the invasive capacities of the new technologies".[30] If these boundaries are blurring, then this cannot be attributed alone to the use made by the State and by corporate bodies of information technologies. There have been other attempts from below, as it were, to 'publicise' and to politicise the domestic and the personal as well as those other arenas from which mainstream political forces have attempted to 'take out' politics - sport, education and wage bargaining for instance. To explain the blurring, we would have to look also to the activities of "people's movements" (the peace, the women's, the ecology, community and even consumer movements) over the

last couple of decades. Whatever else these movements have attempted, it has been to put onto the agenda of public debate issues, contradictions, forms of subordination and oppression which, they have felt, the masters and superintendents of that public debate had overlooked or had chosen to ignore.

But these movements attempted something else as well, and that has been to change, not only the terms and the forms of the public debate, but also the languages of political activity. These movements have not always been prepared to surrender themselves to the entrenched terms and forms of debate they encountered when they ventured into the public domain. And, why not? Because, it has been argued, the ritualised forms of exchange and encounter which they had to negotiate there, in the public domain, contributed to, in some instances, their subordination, while in others to a misrepresentation of the issues involved. These movements have not always been prepared to accept the structures of discursive rules which implicitly and explicitlygovern public debate, in part, because those rules have denied them rights to debate issues, in part also, because the rules and procedures have denied the rationality of their alternative perspectives. What these movements have encountered in raising issues in *their* terms has sometimes been indifference and in almost all cases a contradiction. At the public level, they have encountered indifference to their particular problems and demands when these have been perceived by the owner-occupiers of the public sphere (the mainstream political parties, the bureucrats and journalists) to be irrelevant, to be not properly political. And they have encountered a contradiction because entry into public debate requires the abandonment of the very interests which have driven those movements to seek entry to the public debate. In other words, if they had become involved "as political citizens rather than states" over and above that acceptable level of involvement permitted to voters, they would have had to abandon any hope of politicising the issues they were raising. Ultimately, this is a function of the 'abstraction' (of the separation and estrangement) of the modern state from the noisy and messy sphere of civil society, and of the proclamation "that every member of the people is an equal participant in popular sovereignty regardless of distinctions...based on birth, rank, education and occupation".[31]

What we have seen in the development of these people's movements then are a number of things. These movements have asserted that 'rationality' is to be found beyond the boundaries the already established public sphere. Their activities have demonstrated the limits and limitations of involvement in that already established public sphere. They have demonstrated that to become involved in the public sphere, under the terms and conditions which govern

ritualised debates there, would have led to disregarding the very distinctions which had driven them to seek 'publicity' and to mobilise public opinion. Moreover, their activities have also demonstrated the inadequacies of the Left's classical statism, which has, only with great difficulty been able to comprehend and to respond to the fact that the organised and coherent actions of these movements have also blurred the long-maintained distinctions between the 'public' and the 'private'. All this and more has been demonstrated, yet not, it would seem to those who would encourage broadcasters to carry on recognising 'the special relationship between broadcasting and the public sphere'.

The concept of 'national identity'.

Section four of the BRU's document proposes that "broadcasters should recognise their special relationship to the sense of national identity and community". It goes on to say that "public service broadcasting...has to recognise the value of the national view - in some celebrations, in national crises, in some sporting events, in great issues and challenges which go beyond the local and particular and affect us all".[23] It does so as though this were an entirely unproblematic recommendation, as though there were no problems associated with notions of 'national identity'.

In the light of what has just now been said, we might reasonably ask just what sorts of issues and challenges the authors have mind which they think actually do go beyond "the local and particular and affect us all'. It might not be too difficult to respond to this question. Clearly some of the decisions about the future of broadcasting currently being contemplated might be thought of as affecting us all, not to mention the issues raised and the challenges presented by a whole series of other economic, political and military decisions taken in the name of 'the nation' or of even grander categories. But, it would only be through a considerable effort of abstraction and misrepresentation that we could say that these decisions would affect us all *equally*. This could only be said, if we chose to disregard all those distinctions and hierarchies of everyday living which separate and divide the 'nation' into social classes, and more finely still, into particular sub-groups and communities - and, not least of all, viewing categories.

The notions of national identity and of national culture have also been questioned in other, related contexts. Their use often implies a quite specific set of experiences that is shared by, or is common to virtually all the inhabitants of a given country, and, clearly some such use has not been uncommon in the context of 'serious' broadcasting. Such an implication can have the effect of disengaging attention to

other experiences - those of class, age, region, community and gender for instance - or, it can lead to the ignorance of the differential effects of policies and decisions which have been taken 'on behalf of the nation as a whole'.

It is rare to find a specification given to national identity or national culture, however much it is proposed as a more attractive alternative to that culture, that structure of ideas and sentiments, which appears to be encouraged by the international traffic in cultural commodities. So, what passes for *the* national culture may turn out to be nothing more than a sectional one, perhaps the structure of ideas and sentiments that is specific to the politically or economically dominant groups of a given country. We know from a wide range of research that it is far from uncommon that such dominant groups have a tendency to try and generalise their world views - to make them 'hegemonic' - and that they will seek to recruit the media to this end. Or, it may turn out to be lovingly recreated and idealised remnants of residual cultures.

Moreover, as Armand Mattelart and his colleagues have recently pointed out, "when the defence of cultural identity becomes confused with the defence of a fixed past, it runs the risk of filling a strictly conservative role. It finds itself reduced to a role of complacency, reduced, in fact, to an asphyxiating localism". Such notions can, they point out, also work as "the standard bearer for an alternative cultural imperialism. This happens when a country presents itself as a champion of a linguistic community and simply treats the latters as a market unified by common language, rather than taking account of its underlying diversity. The history of 'Latinity' is a prime example of this tendency". What Mattelart and his colleagues have in mind here is the French government's championing of the creation of a "latin audio-visual space".[33]

The main reason for raising these points is to suggest that use of the concept of 'national identity' without some kind of specification can lead to all sorts of 'chaotic generalisations', and to pursuit of broadcasting policies which merely reinforce the misrepresentations of the past. Moreover, its use can all too easily lead to isolationism and protectionism, to stunting the growth and development of particular broadcasting systems by sealing them off from any and all outside influences.

In defence of 'the tyranny of popular taste'.

It is quite clear from the literature that would have us defend the principles of PSB that there is not much sympathy for editorial policies that seek to identify and connect

with popular tastes, popular interests, concerns, and wants. In many respects this literature is right to suggest that such editorial policies have long been associated with the commercialised sectors of cultural production. Given that the prime directive in these sectors is to make money and that the way to do so has been seen as maximising audiences/consumers, there is, as has been demonstrated by writers such as Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, a consistent tendency for commercial media to draw on values and assumptions which are most familiar. That the commercialised sectors have been able to establish and maintain connections with popular cultures is now broadly accepted, though there are still those who would want to deny this. Now, the debates have shifted somewhat. They have had to since we can no longer afford to be debating whether or not to commercialise the organised production of cultural artefacts, nor can we dispute the fact that in the wake of commercialisation connections with subordinate cultures have been made. The debates are now directed more at what seems to follow from these connections.

In general, it would seem as if this connection has only had the effect of maintaining things as they are and of idealising them. It has been argued that this connection sustains a kind of reactionary populism, that it over-privileges personal experience, that it sustains a common sense which is regarded as a loose and contradictory amalgam of myths, aphorisms and folkloric nuggets of wisdom. The kinds of experience and wisdom the connection is deemed to sustain appears to have much in common with Barthes's "scientific vulgate"; fragmentary knowledges and vulgarisms which, when they are collected together through the activities of the media "form a monster, and this monster is ideology". In more lenient assessments, it is an amalgam which is considered to contain elements of 'good sense', that is elements which its estranged assessors would consider properly rational. But, these few instances of good sense seem to have been thoroughly contaminated by the irrational, the magical and the mythical. They are certainly considered worth salvaging, de-contaminating and cultivating. But, this it seems, can only be done by severing the connections established by the commercialised sectors of cultural production and entering instead into association with those rational, OK bodies of knowledge which have been kept well apart from popular ones.

It would certainly be wrong to suggest that the commercial sector's connection with popular cultures has been *very* different from that proposed by this sector's critics. We know, from the evidence of opinion polls and from the evidence of practical activity, that there is much about everyday life in the UK that is quite properly labelled reactionary (sexist, racist, chauvinist). We know from such evidence that the reciprocity which has been established

between the commercial sectors and popular cultures can sustain myths which permit us to avoid coming to terms with and confronting our own involvement in making things as they are. Our internalisation of these myths can make it seem that we have nothing to do with the course of anything so grand as history, can make it seem that history is something which just happens, or is made by others in high office while we suffer, or make the best of the results, and take what little pleasure we can from life whatever its consequences.

But, that granted, we can still legitimately insist that the outcome of the connection has been somewhat different from this. What has emerged from this connection has not always followed the road to conservatism and reaction, because if it had, we could not explain how the movements referred to earlier have arisen, have grown in strength, have been able to make excessive demands upon the dominant political-economic forces, and have won, sometimes, concessions and changes from them. Popular programmes do not always dwell on, or over-privilege personal experience. Popular programmes are capable of demonstrating that what might have seemed a singular, individual experience is in fact a social experience. Popular programmes do not always put before us well-rounded, unique characters. They do indeed often work with 'stereotypes', with social categories devoid of all the myths of individualism, and the fact that they do, may very well prove to be one of the conditions of collectivising experience, one of the conditions for actively recognising mutual dependence. And, in turning the world upside down, in disarranging the categories of the 'normal' world and in re-arranging [illegible] and reassembling time and space, popular narratives can, and have been pre-figurative, suggestive of new directions rather than merely re-affirming old, familiar ones.

Some conclusions.

This paper is entitled 'A case for popular broadcasting'. The general argument of the paper has been that the unqualified implementation of several of the principles of PSB does not stimulate, but on the contrary, inhibits the further development of popular broadcasting. However, it does not follow from this that we should recommend abandoning all those principles. Broadcasting should indeed be universal in a geographic sense, and broadcasting should indeed cater for all interests and tastes, just so long as it does not continue to cater disproportionately for those endorsed by the political and aesthetic establishments or their subalterns. Given that there are minorities which have been, and still are, grievously disadvantaged by broadcasting steps should be taken to rectify this situation

in ways which do not create minority ghettoes. Whatever programmes are transmitted they should be of quality, bearing in mind that there is more than one way to define 'quality'. These are just some of the principles that ought to be recommended and implemented.

However, it ought to be recognised that these principles cannot be fully implemented if some of the others which have been recommended to us are as well. If broadcasting is still to be distanced from all vested interests, and if broadcasting still has to recognise a special relationship to such abstractions as 'national identity', 'national interest', or 'national culture', then we must be prepared to accept the continuance of a systemic indifference on the part of public service organisations to all those interests which are politically and aesthetically subordinate at present.

These remarks should not be interpreted as an unqualified case for the defence and the expansion of merely market regulations on broadcasting or, more generally, organised cultural production. Nor are they to be read as a defence of the commercial broadcasting companies and a critique of the practical history of the BBC which supports the recommendation that the BBC should now be broken up and the remnants sold off to whichever commercial bodies are interested in them. The above arguments recognise that there are limitations to the commercial logic which is now very much in the acsendancy. Not least among these limitations are the unreasonable and unrealistic dictates of excessive profitability. Already cable operators are cutting back and taking the easiest financial options. Rather than exploring how to construct attractive and engaging local programmes for instance, they are abandoning this altogether. So, despite the potential of cable to offer a more varied and flexible schedule of programmes, operators will for the foreseable future rely on a fairly narrow range of transnationally circulated programmes. Perhaps this explains why in the UK there has been such a high 'crunch rate' - why substantial proportions of new subscribers have already withdrawn.

However, the main thrust of the argument has been to suggest that to overcome these limitations we should not simply look for narrowly defined economic strategies. Such strategies must be combined with representational and editorial ones. In these latter respects, there is no longer any basis for supposing that the principles of PSB can be resurrected as the means by which to overcome and go beyond these limitations. What we need now are new editorial criteria and practices. Great! But where are these to be found? They are certainly not to be found among the standard practices of 'serious' TV, for these, I have proposed, simply reproduce the structures of vision, thought and sentiment of

increasingly estranged political and intellectual elites. Rather less contentiously, perhaps, there would seem to be no point either in looking exclusively to the *avant-garde*. I would suggest that we must now look more openly and less evaluatively at hard-core popular television. Though much more research is required on how such programmes make connections with all sorts of popular experiences, surely enough has already been done to satisfy us that these programmes can sustain not just 'reactionary populist perspectives', but also 'progressive popular' ones.

To reject the view that all the existing principles of PSB should be defended and extended to the operation of the newer technologies, is then also to reject the indiscriminate condemnation of commercial practices in the sphere of organised cultural production. It is indeed so that many of these practices have been exploitative. It is indeed the case that commercial companies have been overly pre-occupied with maintaining their revenues from advertisers, and it is also the case that commercial practices and concerns can be restrictive. But, to note only these features is to take a quite one-sided view of commercial enterprises. These enterprises are nothing without their viewers. These enterprises cannot take their viewers willingness to view or to subscribe for granted. They are far from omnipotent and exercise no fabulous powers over their viewers or consumers. Sometimes, despite the preferred judgements and wishes of their owners and controllers, these enterprises have been driven commercially to connect with a wide variety of popular cultures and interests. Rather than castigate this achievement as "populism pretending to be democracy" or as "pandering to popular taste", we should be learning from it and learning how to develop what has already been achieved to evolve genuinely socialised and 'civilised' relations between the producers and consumers of cultural goods.

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